Notes on Some of England's Younger Novelists

A London Letter From

Hugh Walpole

in America.

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WHEN one attempts any kind of estimate of the younger English novelists one is confronted by several difficulties. In the first place they are still "younger"; that is, they are all, with the exception of Percival Gibbon and J. H. Beresford, only a few years over 30. In spite of the volume of work they have already produced, being novelists and not poets, the books for which they will finally stand are in all probability yet to come. Every year some critic solemnly announces that Mr. Mackenzie or Mr. Cannan or Mr. Swinnerton has shown us now the best that he can do. They are all, with again the possible exception of Mr. Beresford, in the preliminary stages of their art.

The second difficulty is one of classification. Ever since some two years before the war Henry James published his manifesto about the "younger novel" in the *Times* this classification has been persistently attempted. Henry James failed because he obstinately refused to apply any but his own personal methods to the art of the novel, and naturally he discovered Edith Wharton to be the most perfect novelist of our time. Arthur Waugh was, perhaps, the most successful interpreter of the younger novel when he declared a certain romantic realism to be the new note. But in any case this classification is impossible. The new men have little in common. There is a wide distance, indeed, between the realism of *Sinister Street* and the realism of *Nocturne*, between the detailed analysis of *Mary Olivier* and the detailed analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*.

I have ventured to make a division here between the romanties and the realists simply because I fancy that I do see here a real difference of aim; only one writer of all the men whom I mention seems to me a romantic realist in the modern and Conradian sense of the word—Francis Brett Young, and only two woman—Sheila Kaye-Smith and Clemence Dane.

Of the younger romanties now writing the most important in the popular estimation is undoubtedly Compton Mackenzie. I speak of him with some difficulty, because there is some element in his work, a kind of false theatricality, a sort of tinsel and gold tissue effect that spoils for one everything that he writes. I have not read his last three books, and I am not likely to read any future work of his, simply because this element seems inseparable from his art. It would be absurd therefore for me to say more of him than this: that his cleverness, humor, style and dramatic sense have placed him in the enviable position of being alone among the younger authors in that he has a wide popular circulation and is also seriously estimated by the critics.

His books give pleasure to all kinds of people, and many critics believe him to be the future leader of the English novel.

After him in popular estimation among the more romantic younger writers comes J. C. Snaith. Snaith's position is a most curious one. He has written every kind of novel, the costume romanticism of *Mistress Dorothy Marion*, the Meredithian *Broker of Covenden*, the mystical *William Jordan* and *Henry Northcote*, the whimsical, humorous *Araminta*, the serious *Sailor* and *Undefeated*. One thing he has never been, and that is sheer realist. He promised at one time to be the best romantic novelist of our time. *Broke of Covenden* and *Henry Northcote* are astonishing examples of modern romantic writing, and *Broke* at least will always keep its place. For myself he has never touched that great level since those two books, and both *The Sailor* and *The Undefeated* were spoiled for me by what I felt was undue sentimentality. The "pathetic fallacy" is in both of them driven into the very last ditch.

I don't know why it is, but he is seldom mentioned by critics when they try to summarize the literature of their day; he is certainly worthy of much more serious estimation than many of the young drab realists now in fashion. He may easily still prove himself to be the leading novelist of them all.

Another romantic novelist who has not yet received his proper due is Frederick Niven. I wrote about him, I think, in one of these letters several months ago, and said then that he was underestimated because he had tried so many various kinds of fiction. It is noticeable of him that however grimly realistic he has endeavored at times to be, especially in *Justice of the Peace* and *Two Generations* and *Ellen Adair*, the romantic, poetic note has persistently obtruded. This is partly, I think, because he has a very beautiful and varied style, a little imitative, perhaps—he writes more like Stevenson than any novelist of our time—but often eloquent and moving. *The Justice of the Peace* is a fine novel. No modern has put Glasgow and Edinburgh so truthfully on paper, but I think he is more truly himself in such deliberately romantic novels as *Dead Men's Bells* and *A Wilderness of Monkeys*.

He would probably strongly object to my calling *A Wilderness of Monkeys* a romantic novel. He intended it doubtless for fierce and bitter protest against the sex preoccupation of his time. Whatever he intended it to be, it is unquestionably as a poetic romance that it finally evolved. It is a curious and moving book, unlike any other in the English language, and one that persists most obstinately in the imagination long after it has been read and put away. His Western cowboy stories are more declared romances, and because of the simplicity of their aim they have perhaps been too easily dismissed by the critics. Nevertheless, in such books as *Hands Up* and his latest, *The Lady of the Crossing*, he has taken old themes and given them a new color and beauty. I don't know a modern novel that is easier to read and simpler to enjoy without any sense of degradation or of time wasting than *The Lady of the Crossing*. No metaphysics, no realism in the old sense, very little analysis, but good English, good humor and living human beings.

Niven has not, I think, combined the romantic and realistic strains in him as he should do. When he does, and the time is not far away, perhaps, he should produce a book that will startle the English speaking world.

I have left to the last the man who is, I think, among the more romantic younger English novelists, easily the first. I mean Francis Brett Young.

Brett Young published first with his brother a novel, *Undergrowth*, and this was a very remarkable study in atmosphere. It is as a creator of atmosphere that he still stands out from the rest. I sometimes wonder whether he will not always be poet rather than novelist, as, indeed, so many of these younger romantic novelists tend to be. It is interesting to note that Mackenzie, Niven and Brett Young have all published volumes of verse, while Beresford, Swinnerton and George, the leaders of the younger realistic school, have never, so far as I know, written a line of verse in their lives.

Brett Young's poetry is of the first importance, and he is, in the opinion of some capable critics, the best of the newer English poets. It is then, naturally, the poetic side of his fiction that is the most satisfactory. When one looks back on his novels it is always the atmosphere rather than the characters in them that one remembers—the Welsh mountains of *Undergrowth*, the sea coast of *Deep Sea*, the mines of *The Iron Age*, the desert in *The Crescent Moon*. He is nevertheless realist as well as romantic, and alone in this group presents the poetry and the prose of his subjects. He does not cover it with glittering moonshine like Mackenzie, sentimentalize over it like Snaith, divide his talent deliberately into romance and realism like Niven; he fuses all his elements together and produces a real work of art as a result. I am tempted to say that he writes better English prose than any living English novelist save only Conrad. Whether that is true or no, his work is of very real importance and not to be missed by any student of the English novel.

Like Niven, he has not yet shown us what he can really do, but *The Iron Age*, *The Crescent Moon* and *The Young Physician* are no bad beginning.

HUGH WALPOLE.

On Exploring an Attic Treasury at Random

CARL VAN VECHTEN discourses so admirably on so vast an array of topics kindred to art that one is hard put to it at times to discover just wherein he fails of signal achievement as a critic and essayist. His method of workmanship suggests Arthur Symons at times; again it seems to be the delightful trumpet (or is it a piccolo?) of Huneker that he is blowing. Arthur Symons embraces and makes peculiarly his own the subjects he treats through an impressionistic rendering of his own spirit always. The reader feels the intense personality of the man (that personality that has shrivelled and suffered in so many transient flames) in every line Symons writes.

Mr. Van Vechten may be described as more objective in his treatment of subject matter; the reader is concerned more with the theme and less with the writer. This can hardly be called a matter for criticism, for in a final analysis one method is as good as another; it is merely a matter of personal predilection. Next to Huneker, however, your reviewer knows of no American essayist and critic of the arts whom he would rather read than Carl Van Vechten.

In the Garret is especially pleasing. Like *The Merry Go Round* it is a casual collection of essays and critiques, often illuminating in their evocative urges and always entertaining for quaintness of conceit, freshness of attitude and felicity of expression. Music, apparently Mr. Van Vechten's dearest love, as it is that of Huneker, is liberally commented upon, but there are a number of other topics. These range from the folk songs of Iowa to the holy jumpers of the Bahama Islands. Naughty George Moore is among those present in the garret, along with Sir Arthur Sullivan, Havelock Ellis and Oscar Hammerstein.

Then there are vivid glimpses of Mimi Aguglia as *Salome*, and a rather fateful intimation of her since accomplished failure as an English speaking actress. Also is there comment on Ridgely Torrence's attempt toward the establishment of a negro theatre, the achievements of the Yiddish players in New York, the Spanish theatre and the lack of it, a review of the life of that adventurer Philip Thicknesse and a dissertation on the relative difficulties of depicting heaven and hell in music.

One of the most delicious efforts in the book is the aforementioned description of the folk songs of Iowa. Folk songs of Iowa! gasps the reader. Then he peruses and learns. Mr. Van Vechten apparently [illegible] exploring through the volumes of certain literary adventurers who were discovering folk songs in all corners of these United States. The hint was enough. Mr. Van Vechten determined to become an explorer, and he picked Iowa for victim. Armed with a tuning fork, a pad and a pencil, he set or sat forth in an ancient carriage, aflame with ardor and ambition.

He stops at a farmhouse, where, as he fondly imagines, folk song might exist. After being informed that "we don't want to buy nothin'" he wheedles the woman present into securing a song for him. Her daughter Aggie will oblige, and the explorer settles himself to take notes. In a loud voice Aggie pours forth her soul in this wise:

"Oh——ev'ry evening hear him sing
It's the cutest little thing,
Got the cutest little swing,
Hitchy Koo, Hitchy Koo, Hitchy Koo."

"Why is it," murmurs Mr. Van Vechten feebly to himself elsewhere in the article, "that Natalie Burlin, Loraine Wyman, Frances Densmore and Cecil Sharp can go out in the morning and return at night with a bundle of songs in Mixolydian, Dorian and Æolian modes?"

But he does find the folk song of Iowa in the rippling miles of corn, swaying under the pulsating and multitudinous voices of the wind. "*I am the Corn!* is the folk song of Iowa, and can it be said that any other state or nation has produced a better song?"

H. S. G.

IN THE GARRET. By CARL VAN VECHTEN. Alfred A. Knopf.

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